

Kirk Fordham: When it comes to the Everglades, this is no time to wait

By Kirk Fordham, guest columnist

Thursday, October 9, 2008

With the pending acquisition of U.S. Sugar, Floridians' hopes of witnessing meaningful Everglades restoration were raised considerably.

But a report issued last week by the National Research Council reminded us of the many obstacles confronting the ambitious effort to restore the River of Grass. Urging swift action to put the restoration effort back on track, the NRC report warns that "to do nothing is, in fact, to do harm."

This report serves as yet another reminder that we are in a race against time to forestall the ecological decline of the Everglades, and we must move immediately to conserve this priceless national resource — one which provides huge economic benefits and tens of thousands of jobs to our state.

In fact, where environmental restoration efforts are underway in Florida, the results have been nothing short of remarkable.

Along the Kissimmee River, which is halfway through its restoration process, there has been an immediate rebound of wildlife that once inhabited the area. Bald eagles are spotted regularly, wading-bird populations have multiplied, and numerous species of ducks have returned to sections of the river that have been completed.

The progress achieved along the Kissimmee River has been a bonanza for individuals and families who relish the fishing, paddling, camping and hunting opportunities made possible by this successful effort.

In Southwest Florida, where an area known as the Picayne Strand is being restored, deer, wood stork, black bear and Florida panthers are moving back into their original habitat — even before the project returns the natural flow of water into the region. The project will eventually allow the right mix of fresh and salt water to flow south into the spectacular Ten Thousand Islands area of Everglades National Park, allowing declining fish populations to rebound and the recovery of portions of Florida Bay.

If the environmental and economic benefits of Everglades restoration are so obvious, it's clear they could speed up the implementation of several critical initiatives:

- We must complete the first phase of elevating Tamiami Trail to increase the flow of freshwater into Everglades National Park. While the first bridge is under construction, planning for the next phase should begin immediately.
- The South Florida Water Management District has done a commendable job of

jump-starting the critical C-111 Canal Project, which will direct freshwater to the southern Everglades and northeastern Florida Bay. The benefits to the huge number of people who enjoy the recreational opportunities provided by the bay are immeasurable.

- Gov. Charlie Crist's bold proposal to purchase 187,000 acres of prime agricultural land from U.S. Sugar must move forward. This achievement will protect the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries from damaging freshwater releases, while providing an enormous new supply of clean water to sustain the core Everglades and South Florida's drinking water supply.
- Florida must restore water quality of the over-managed and highly polluted Lake Okeechobee watershed. Aside from the ecological and economic damage inflicted on the lake and the surrounding communities, the abundance of nitrates and other pollutants poses great risks and difficulty in restoring the flow of clean water to the Everglades.

Florida is running out of time to salvage the Everglades. Our children will judge us harshly if we fail in this responsibility. Several key projects are under way and must be completed without further delay. The time to act is now.

*Fordham, of Palmetto Bay, is the chief executive officer of the Everglades Foundation.
E-mail: kfordham@evergladesfoundation.org. Phone: (305) 251-0001, Ext. 227.*



© 2008 Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers